

The writer, a Republican, represents Nebraska's 2nd District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

I would like to thank The World-Herald for bringing the issue of congressional earmarks to its news and editorial pages. Taxpayers have rightfully asked for accountability for the tax dollars that they send to the U.S. Treasury, and the debate on earmarking has received a great deal of attention.

A May 24 editorial that summed up earmarks as "sometimes necessary" made the point that earmarks may serve a legitimate purpose. Taxpayers have made it very clear, though, that the bar ought to be very high. The famous "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska is a prime example of why change is needed.

Sometimes an earmark can address a state-specific priority with more ease than the bureaucracy of a federal agency. For example, I helped obtain an earmark to fund Creighton University's bioterrorism response improvement project to help Nebraska respond to public health threats. I am a strong proponent of changes to the earmark process. I believe there is a place for earmark requests, provided they survive the scrutiny of Congress and the public. I have voted for requiring that earmark requests are debated at each stage -- subcommittee, committee and on to the full House of Representatives -- so that requests are vetted at all levels.

It is necessary that members of Congress attach their names to each of their earmark requests. This has not been required in the past, but this reflects appropriate accountability for taxpayers.

I support making all earmark requests available via the Internet. I will take this a

step further by posting earmark requests I submit on my official office Web site.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi's new rules concerning ethics and earmarks require that each request include an affidavit signed by the member of the House of Representatives stating that there will be no personal financial interest in the request. This transparency was rightfully adopted in the House but not in the U.S. Senate. However, the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (known as the Ethics Committee) has not clearly defined an earmark or a personal financial interest.

At the beginning of the year, the Ethics Committee said it would not make available the guidelines for complying with new ethics rules until after the deadline for earmark requests had passed. To date, members have no specific guidance to rely upon, only staff members' interpretations.

Members of the House Ethics Committee staff told me that an earmark I have submitted each year I have been in Congress -- the earmark provides infrastructure improvement dollars for storm water and sanitary sewer system separation in east Omaha -- can now be interpreted as a personal financial interest because it could affect my property value.

For seven years, I have obtained funding totaling \$5 million. With no way for me to determine if the committee staff is correct, I run the risk of obtaining an earmark for east Omaha and then being found in violation of ethics rules.

What was once funding that I supported seven years in a row to ensure that people in east Omaha do not have raw sewage flooding their basements when a thunderstorm suddenly strikes is now deemed as unethical. I hope that the Ethics Committee will clarify this situation.

The issue of property valuations has become a central issue in whether a House member is benefiting from an earmark. Accusations were made against a member from California because his property was 16 miles away from the location of an earmark. In another instance, Speaker Pelosi's husband has property one mile away from the site of her earmark, but her request was not questioned.

I am working on behalf of my colleagues to obtain clarification. Recently, I attempted to amend an ethics bill requiring the Ethics Committee to create a manual for members and staff with guidance on complying with the new earmark rules. By a vote of 7-3 -- a straight party-line vote -- my amendment was not allowed on the House floor.

My goal is that members of Congress will have clear guidance on earmarks and that I will be able to fulfill the requirements for submitting proper earmark requests. I look forward to again working for much-needed investments in our community.

